Occupy America

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Beginning with Occupy Wall Street in September 2011, a protest movement spread across the United States to 70 major cities and hundreds of other communities. Similar actions emerged in scores of other nations.

For the first two weeks, the corporate-owned mainstream media along with NPR did what they usually do with progressive protests: they ignored them. These were the same media that had given the Tea Party supporters saturation coverage for weeks on end, ordaining them "a major political force."

The most common and effective mode of news repression is omission. By saying nothing or next to nothing about dissenting events, movements, candidates, or incidents, the media consign them to oblivion. When the Occupy movement spread across the country and could no longer be ignored, the media moved to the second manipulative method: trivialization and marginalization.

So we heard that the protestors were unclear about what they were protesting and they were "far removed from the mainstream." Media cameras focused on the clown who danced on Wall Street in full-blown circus costume, and the youths who pounded bongo drums: "a carnival atmosphere" "youngsters out on a spree," with "no connection to the millions of middle Americans" who supposedly watched with puzzlement and alarm.

Such coverage, again, was in sharp contrast to the respectful reportage accorded the Tea Party. House Majority Leader, the reactionary Republican Eric Cantor, described the Occupy

movement as “growing mobs.” This is the same Cantor who hailed the Tea Party as an unexcelled affirmation of democracy.

The big November 2 demonstration in Oakland that succeeded in closing the port was reported by many media outlets, almost all of whom focused on the violence against property committed by a few small groups. Many of those perpetrators were appearing for the first time at the Oakland site. Some were suspected of being undercover police provocateurs. Their actions seemed timed to overshadow the successful shutdown of the nation’s fourth largest port.

Time and again, the media made the protestors the issue rather than the things they were protesting. The occupiers were falsely described as hippie holdovers and mindless youthful activists. In fact, there was a wide range of ages, socio-ethnic backgrounds, and lifestyles, from homeless to well-paid professionals, along with substantial numbers of labor union members. Far from being a jumble of confused loudmouths prone to violence, they held general assemblies, organized themselves into committees, and systematically took care of encampment questions, food, security, and sanitation.

One unnoticed community protest was Occupy Walnut Creek. For those who don’t know, Walnut Creek is a comfortable conservative suburb in northern California (with no known record of revolutionary insurrections). Only one local TV station gave Occupy Walnut Creek brief attention, noting that about 400 people were participating, average age between 40 and 50, no clowns, no bongos. Participants admitted that they lived fairly prosperous lives but still felt a kinship with the millions of Americans who were enduring an economic battering. Here was a contingent of affluent but rebellious “middle Americans” yet Walnut Creek never got mentioned in the national media, as far as I know.

The Occupy movement has promulgated a variety of messages. With a daring plunge into class realities, the occupiers talk of the 1% who are exploiting the 99%, a brilliant propaganda formula, simple to use, yet saying so much, now widely embraced even by some media commentators. The protestors carried signs condemning the republic’s terrible underemployment and the empire’s endless wars, the environmental abuses perpetrated by giant corporations, the tax loopholes enjoyed by oil companies, the growing inequality of incomes, and the banksters and other gangsters who feed so lavishly from the public trough.

Some occupiers even denounced capitalism as a system and hailed socialism as a humane alternative. In all, the Occupy movement revealed an awareness of systemic politico-economic injustices not usually seen in U.S. protests. Remember, the initial and prime target was Wall Street, finance capital's home base.

The mainstream news outlets not only control opinions but even more so opinion visibility, which in turn allows them to limit the parameters of public discourse. This makes it all the more imperative for ordinary people to join together in demonstrations, hoping thereby to maximize the visibility and impact of their opinions. The goal is to break through the near monopoly of conservative orthodoxy maintained by the "liberal" media.

So demonstrations are important. They have an energizing effect on would-be protestors, bringing together many who previously had thought themselves alone and voiceless. Demonstrations bring democracy into the streets. They highlight issues that have too long been buried. They mobilize numbers, giving a show of strength, reminding the plutocracy perched at the apex that the pyramid is rumbling.

But demonstrations should evolve into other forms of action. This has already been happening with the Occupy movement. It is more than a demonstration because its protestors did not go home at the end of the day. In substantial numbers they remained downtown, putting their bodies on the line, imposing a discomfort on officialdom just by their numbers and presence.

At a number of Occupy sites there have been civil disobedience actions, followed by arrests. In various cities the police have been unleashed with violent results that sometimes have backfired. In Oakland ex-Marine Scott Olsen was hit by a police teargas canister that busted his skull and left him hospitalized and unable to speak for a week. At best, he faces a long slow recovery. The day after Olsen was hit, hundreds of indignant new protestors joined the Occupy Oakland site. Police brutality incites a public reaction, often bringing more people out, just the opposite of what officials want.

Where does this movement go? What is to be done? The answers are already arising from the actions of the 99%:

- Discourage military recruitment and support conscientious objectors. Starve the empire of its legions. Organize massive tax resistance in protest of corrupt, wasteful, unlawful, and destructive Pentagon spending

- Transfer funds from corporate banks to credit unions and community banks. Support programs that assist the unemployed and the dispossessed. It was Giulio Tremonti, Italy's embattled finance minister who declared: "Salvate il popolo, non le banche"

("Save the people, not the banks"). It would be nice to hear such sentiments emanating from the U.S. Treasury Department or the White House.

- Coordinate actions with organized labor. Unions still are the 99%'s largest and best financed groups. Consider what was done in Oakland: occupiers joined with longshoremen, truckers, and other workers to close the port. Already there are plans for a general strike in various communities. Such actions improve greatly if organized labor is playing a role.

- We need new electoral strategies, a viable third party, proportional representation, and even a new Constitution, one that establishes firm rules for an egalitarian democracy and is not a rigmarole designed to protect the moneyed class. The call for a constitutional convention (a perfectly legitimate procedure under the present U.S. Constitution) seems long overdo.

- Perhaps most of all, we need ideological education regarding the relationship between wealth and power, the nature of capitalism, and the crimes of an unbridled profit-driven financial system. And again the occupiers seem to be moving in that direction: in early November 2011, people nationwide began gathering to join teach-ins on "How the 1% Crashed the Economy."

We need to explicitly invite the African-American, Latino, and Asian communities into the fight, reminding everyone that the Great Recession victimizes everyone but comes down especially hard on the ethnic poor.

We need to educate ourselves regarding the beneficial realities of publicly owned nonprofit utilities, publicly directed environmental protections, public nonprofit medical services and hospitals, public libraries, schools, colleges, housing, and transportation--all those things that work so well in better known in some quarters as socialism.

There is much to do. Still it is rather impressive how the battle is already being waged on so many fronts. Meanwhile the corporate media ignore the content of our protest while continuing to fulminate about the occupiers' violent ways and lack of a precise agenda.

Do not for one moment think that the top policymakers and plutocrats don't care what you think. That is the only thing about you that wins their concern. They don't care about the quality of the air you breathe or the water you drink, or how happy or unhappy or stressed and unhealthy or poor you might be. But they do want to know your thoughts about public

affairs, if only to get a handle on your mind. Every day they launch waves of disinformation to bloat your brains, from the Pentagon to Fox News without stint.

When the people liberate their own minds and take a hard clear look at what the 1% is doing and what the 99% should be doing, then serious stuff begins to happen. It is already happening. It may eventually fade away or it may create a new chapter in our history. Even if it does not achieve its major goals, the Occupy movement has already registered upon our rulers the anger and unhappiness of a populace betrayed.

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